

## **Living Courageously: Our Responsibility to the World**

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?’” (Matthew 16:24-26)

There are many striking passages in the Gospels about what the Lord requires of those who want to be His disciples, i.e., part of His church. For example, in an earlier passage Matthew says,

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’; and ‘a man’s enemies will be those of his own household.’ He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 10:34-39).

Luke puts it this way: –

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

These are challenging passages, and they aren’t all the difficult ones by any means. In fact a major thrust of the Gospels is a life of self-sacrifice – admittedly with the hope of great reward in heaven, but still, it isn’t easy to let go of the here and now.

And, as if self-discipline weren’t a big enough challenge, the Lord commanded His disciples to go out and proselytize – teach and baptize others and encourage them also to give up their natural pleasures! It must have been a tough sell – even as many of us find it is today. Yet He said,

“Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33).

“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His glory...” (Luke 9:26).

In other words, if you’re not courageous enough to declare your faith in the Lord publicly you are risking your spiritual life. So the Lord called His disciples “the light of the world” and said,

“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

So our question today is this. We know that every word of Scripture has a spiritual meaning, that is, a symbolic meaning that relates to our inner life. We know, for example, that when the Lord referred to cutting off the hand that offends He did not mean the physical hand, but the symbolic hand which is the opportunity and the power to offend spiritually, thus the will and the determination to do so. And we know that when He warned the disciples of the last judgment and His second coming He did not mean either that the physical earth would be destroyed or that He would return in a body of flesh and blood, but rather that a spiritual judgment would occur and that He would come again in a new body of teachings that would bring new light to a world darkened by ignorance, misunderstanding and a loss of faith. This being so, are the teachings about self-sacrifice, evangelism and confessing our faith any different?

Let's look again.

What is it to deny one's self, to take up one's cross, and to lose one's life for the Lord's sake? Is it to forsake all worldly wealth and comfort? Simplistically that message would make a lot of sense (and so, many people have been persuaded to subscribe to that philosophy over the centuries). But there are two major flaws with it: first of all it overlooks the problem of a person taking pride in his poverty, or simply enduring it in order to gain something better in the long run, either of which would make it a self-centered virtue; and secondly, it fails to acknowledge the benefits of wealth in providing for others, both materially and spiritually. In other words, if we all give up our worldly assets we all become mere objects of charity and we can hardly *be* charitable to others; we just become pre-occupied with our own survival.

No. Clearly the spiritual message in these words is that in order to follow the Lord we have to give up the idea and the attitude that we are the center of the universe. Instead we need to know and remember that whatever we have, we have from the Lord, and whatever we don't have we don't have because we don't need it right now for our spiritual lives. But this, too, is hard, it's just hard on a different level. It's hard on our pride, it's hard on our understanding, and it's hard on our sense of justice – especially because we are so pre-occupied with worldly things.

And what about our responsibility to “let our light shine,” or in fact, to “go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them... and teaching them to observe all things that (the Lord) has commanded (us)”? This is sometimes called “the great commission” and has been interpreted by generations of Christians to spell out our sacred duty to “bring people to the Lord.” Or what about the teaching so clearly laid out in Matthew 10 and 25 that the disciples were to “heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons,” or feed the hungry, give the thirsty what they need to drink, take in the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and attend to those in prison? If we follow the Lord are we all supposed to have a prison ministry?

No. Again, the answer is that all these conditions in the spiritual sense describe spiritual states, and while it is certainly true that many millions of people need such help on a material plane, it is not true that every Christian has a special obligation to provide such aid. Rather every human has that obligation as a debt to the society in which he lives. What is unique to the Christian is the ability and the responsibility to provide for the spiritual states of those who are needy, that is

to say, of those who recognize and acknowledge that they are so.

Now, for the last 7 weeks many of us here have been participating in a program called “Living Courageously,” following a series of sermons and a notebook about the story of the prophet, Elijah. In that program we discussed both the fear and the courage of Elijah as he confronted the wicked king, Ahab and his vindictive wife, Jezebel. We talked about the miracles that were done for him, personally, and for others at his request: – his being fed by ravens with both bread and meat, the constant replenishment of the widow’s flour and oil, the resurrection of her son, the fire from heaven at Mt. Carmel, the bread and water on his flight to Horeb followed by the wind, the earthquake and the fire on that mountain, the story of Naboth’s vineyard, and finally the chariot and horsemen of fire seen when Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind.

We learned about how Elijah represented the Lord not only to the people of Israel but more importantly to us, and so how he represents the Lord with us, especially in His Word. In this light we spoke of Elijah running away from Jezebel and asked the question, does the Lord in His Word ever run away and hide from us, specifically from the evil in us? The answer was, of course, no, though it seems that way when we run away and hide from Him. Thinking of this, a related question might be asked: is the Lord every afraid? Can we even say He is courageous?

Again the answer will be no, since He is omnipotent. There is nothing that could make Him afraid, nor anything that should inspire courage: He loves everyone, He knows everything, and He’s in charge. His providence is over all.

How, then, are we like Elijah, who represents the Lord?

We’re not. Rather we are like the people of Israel who betray the Lord, or Ahab or Jezebel or the prophets of Baal who give him a hard time. We are like the widow who’s flour and oil almost run out, or who’s son dies and is raised again. We are like Naboth who refuses to sell his vineyard for a garden of herbs. Even the mountains and valleys, the rivers, the wind, the rocks and the fire all represent states of mind in the spiritual landscape of our lives, as does the drought, as do the ravens, as does the mantle or tunic that fell from Elijah when he rose up into heaven.

The thing is, because Elijah represents the Lord with us in His Word we may be inclined to *identify with him* because the things of the Lord with us can *seem* to be our own. We think of it as *our* knowledge of the Word, *our* understanding, *our* affection, *our* conviction, and so on, when really if it is from the Lord it is the Lord Himself working in us; we are just receivers, vessels into which His life flows. And as we’ve said many times, if we believe, as is the case, that all good flows in from the Lord and all evil from the hells, we will take neither credit for the good nor blame for the evil – except insofar as we willingly accept and enjoy it.

What does all this have to do with living courageously, or with our responsibility to the world?

Well, on one hand, it can provide a sort of benchmark for us to measure our understanding and our commitment to the Lord. It’s not as if we have to take up literal serpents or drink any deadly thing (Mark 16:18) to prove our faith in the Lord, but in some ways the test is just as challenging: for if we do have real faith in the Lord we will not be intimidated by arguments to the contrary; we will not be afraid of our ignorance or worried about embarrassment; we won’t be indignant or

resentful if we can't win a debate about "our" religion. Rather we will simply be focused on loving the neighbor, trying to understand his point of view, giving him respect and compassion, offering him whatever insight we can to help him on his spiritual path. We will be full of love and respect for the Lord, and this will be reflected in our care and concern for the other people He loves, namely *everyone*, each according to his needs.

Yes, we may suffer for trying to be helpful: the Gospels and Revelation are full of warnings about this. There is a cross of great pain that we have to bear as we learn to let go of our selfish and worldly concerns. But, we read, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for their's is the kingdom of heaven." Indeed, "Blessed are *you* when they revile and persecute *you*, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven..." (Matt. 5:1-11). Note – "the kingdom of heaven is within you:" it is not some far off ideal; nor is the reward of heaven the result of any calculated judgment; it is simply the result of being who you are – if you have a heavenly disposition.

So in the end our responsibility is not to try to convert everyone. In terms of the Elijah story our responsibility is to receive the prophet, to honor him, and to do what he says. This includes recognizing the spiritual meaning and purpose of his work, which primarily had to do with the condemnation and rejection of the falsity and evil we find within ourselves represented by Ahab, Jezebel and the prophets of Baal.

In terms of the Gospels it is simply to give, not to compel or take anything away, but to give as we have received, by sharing as we would want information and love to be shared with us. It is to go not into the way of the Gentiles, that is, into a state of mixed motives and merely natural life, nor into any city of the Samaritans, that is, a compromised or false understanding, but to go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel by helping those who want help in their spiritual lives and know they need it (AC 4956, 4302). In the end, when Jesus told His disciples to go and make disciples of all the nations He did not mean every other soul had to be converted in order to get to heaven; He meant that all those aspects and characteristics of people everywhere (within and outside of the church) that are represented by the nations, namely, all those things that are innocent and good within each of us, must be brought under the training and discipline of His Word so that we can be effective in letting His light shine.

It can be relatively easy to criticize and try to improve others. It is hard work involving a great deal of courage and sacrifice to try to improve ourselves and our approach to others. But this is the real task before us. And this we can do if we recognize that it is not we ourselves who do it but the Lord in us – the Lord whose wisdom and power is dramatically illustrated in the story of Elijah; the Lord whose love cannot be changed or diminished; the Lord who, like Elijah, when His life in this world was over simply ascended into heaven, and who said, "Lo, *I am with you always*, even to the end of the age."

Amen.

Lessons:     I Samuel 3:selections  
                  Talk on the Call of Samuel (not directly related to the sermon)  
                  Matthew 10:1-15 & 32-39  
                  Arcana Caelestia #4956